

# BRINGING EUROPE BACK IN: GLOBAL IR, AREA STUDIES AND THE DECENTRING AGENDA

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## Europe@Ox: Unfinished business

When I arrived in Oxford in the late 1990s to teach International Relations and European studies, coming from North America where the idea of studying specific regions of the world in multi-disciplinary academic clusters was slowly but surely withering away, I was thrilled to discover this University's unique commitment to Area Studies. To be sure, if IR developed as the 'American Social Science', European contributions to the field have tended to be more pluralistic. But even in the British context, Oxford seemed relatively unique, starting with the kind of multi-disciplinary mindset encouraged by the collegiate system. Perhaps most importantly, and certainly ironically, the University's historic role in supporting Great Britain's colonial project had laid the foundation for its continued engagement with the global south and its regions. From my IR standpoint, I could only bank on the hope that Oxford's partaking in the 'civilising mission' of yesteryear had given way to a true scholarly commitment to mutual recognition.<sup>1</sup>

But to my surprise, one piece of this puzzle was missing: in Oxford, Europe (along with the United States) did not seem to count as a 'region' or an 'area' to be taught alongside others under the broad umbrella of Area Studies. Instead it figured safely at the heart of humanities and social science disciplines, as the core material for teaching history, politics or international relations. This state of affairs is common in European universities, as well as in the US, where in any case all area studies have been radically culled in favour of narrow disciplinary anchoring.

In the twenty intervening years in Oxford, some things have stayed the same and some things have changed. Area Studies has grown and consolidated as the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, the

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largest community of Area Studies scholars anywhere in the world. But in spite of efforts on the part of many of us, Europe and the EU remain outside Area Studies (except as part of Russian and East European studies). In the meanwhile, we have deepened our commitment to teaching and research under the broad umbrella of 'global IR', an agenda encapsulated in Amitav Acharya's keynote lecture at ISA in 2014.<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, this commitment is both epistemological and ontological. Epistemologically, as a scholar committed to global IR, I apprehend my field as an interdisciplinary space where explorations of the global meet from a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives from game theory to international law, global history,<sup>3</sup> global sociology,<sup>4</sup> or political theory. Area Studies represents geographically-bound spaces for the multilogical exploration of these knowledge boundaries. IR's global reach is predicated on taking in these areas not only as resources or 'cases' but as sources or 'voices'.<sup>5</sup> Ontologically, global IR is grounded on an understanding of the world through the lens of diversity and interconnection, amenable to comparisons across space and time, be it as a world of regions,<sup>6</sup> or as a multiplicity of systems, from empires to federations, leagues of city states, or state systems, vying for survival or pre-eminence across historical eras.

In this perspective, the relationship between global IR and Area Studies can be seen as a subset of the need for more general critical engagement between the Social Sciences and Area Studies, which Börzel and Zürn for instance have labelled 'double reflexivity', e.g. the need, on the one hand 'for generalizing social scientists to consider the impossibility of analysing global processes with impartiality because their own perspectives are always contextualized', and on the other hand 'for localizing area studies to acknowledge methods and mechanisms that allow moving towards generalization'.<sup>7</sup> I would go further and argue that from an IR perspective, such mutual engagement requires not only self-reflexivity (acknowledging that one always speaks from somewhere) but radical decentring and 'reversing the gaze' (acknowledging the centrality of those speaking from elsewhere, wherever your 'elsewhere' happens to be). In other words, it needs to be not only synergistic but symbiotic, one of mutual constitution, epistemologically and ontologically, where Area Studies does not only play the role of contextualising side-kick to IR generalisers but is itself the locus of emergence of generalising approaches to the socio-political.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say that such an understanding of mutual constitution is best thought of as a branch of critical theory, which is where I situate my work.<sup>9</sup> Some would call it analytical 'tough love'.

To be sure, this is a game of infinite mirrors, as one decentres to other loci of knowledge which might in turn one day themselves become self-centric and hegemonic. Indeed, be it a national or a regional mantra, there is nothing less exceptional than exceptionalism claims – whether

we treat exceptionalism as an ontological statement in the Area Studies debate (are the defining features of particular regions so unique to be usefully compared or generalised?) or as a politicised narrative grounded on what I would call *nationalist regionalism*.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the risk in global IR is to reify non-Western loci of authority, and to forget to decentre *within*. Nevertheless, Euro-exceptionalism talk *is* exceptional to the extent that it structures the distribution of epistemic as well as material power in the international system. (I am not to expand here on the necessary comparison with US-exceptionalism.)

I consider it more urgent than ever, therefore, to bring Europe back to the embracing fold of Area Studies, in Oxford, for sure, but also beyond in the epistemologies of power. And in doing so to use European studies to better serve the global IR agenda. Why should Europe (or the United States) be the core referent if you study, say, constitutionalism? Why can't you reverse the gaze and start with the transformative constitutionalisms of South Africa or India and ask what these experiences tell us about European constitutionalism?<sup>11</sup> This premise inspired the launch of Oxford's RENEW programme (Rethinking Europe in a Non-European World) in 2005 at a time when our emergence from post-Cold War complacency combined with the fall-out from the Iraq war inspired EU scholars to travel 'out there' and ask 'how do they see us?' In contrast, RENEW's ambition was based on the simple diagnosis that we live in an increasingly post-Western world, and certainly in a non-European world, and that it was worth revisiting the old critique of Eurocentrism, ultimately from a policy-oriented perspective. Our mindset was informed by a broader commitment to reconsider the sources and expressions of our flawed and multiple modernities, a despondency in equating the West, or anywhere else for that matter, with progress, and a commitment to listening to the voice of the less powerful, the subaltern, from within and from without.<sup>12</sup> I turn here to three strands of a broader agenda.

### **Europe's Colonial DNA, standards of civilisation and the post-imperial**

One first strand of RENEW had to do with exploring the double meaning of Europe's 'post-imperial' condition in a *longue durée* historical and comparative perspective, including through a seven-year-long collaborative project between historians and political scientists at Oxford resulting in *Echoes of Empire*.<sup>13</sup> On one hand, and empirically, *post* refers to post as reproduction, or the idea that the EU's relations with the rest of the world cannot be understood short of engaging with the colonial inheritances of its member states, whether as colonising or colonised states. As we move from national to transnational and multi-site entangled memory, we also need to acknowledge the blind spots of our European memory, where more often than not the referent 'Europe as a community of memory' refers to Europe's global civil war of 1939-

45, rather than the wars it inflicted onto the rest of the world decades and centuries earlier. Hence the need to deconstruct the myth of the EU's virgin birth and its politics of denial since 1958 when assessing its foreign policy, especially in Africa.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, and normatively, *post* refers to post as transformation, the normative horizon of truly overcoming this colonial past through self-reflexivity and engagement with the historical legacies that colour the gaze of others. Indeed, what is the point in exploring the darker side of western modernity, if not to overcome its ongoing and entrenched consequences today?<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, our aim was also prescriptive, e.g. to ask what a post-colonial approach to EU external relations might look like.

To be sure, we adopted a social scientific approach to exploring historical legacy, rejecting blanket statements about neocolonialism, asking instead when and under what conditions would we recognise these legacies when we see them. Indeed, while imperial ideologies underwent profound change in the course of the 19th and 20th century, we continue to be confronted with similar questions raised by the relationship between liberalism and imperialism.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, while some denounce the legacies of colonialism they discern in the EU's practices and discourse, others believe these accusations to be unfounded, thus raising the question: how apt is the analogy between the 19th-century standard of civilisation and the EU's narratives and modes of actions today? In response, we developed a 'new standards typology' articulated around two axes: agency denial and systemic hierarchy, referring respectively to the unilateral shaping of standards applicable to others, and to the salience of Eurocentrism in the way the standards are enforced and structure the international system.<sup>17</sup> And we argued that in transforming their 'continent' from a metropolis to a *microcosm* – from a cluster of colonial capitals to an EU that contains many of the world's tensions within itself – Europeans have only partially succeeded in transcending their colonial impulses. If the EU suffers today from geopolitical solitude it may also look for a way out in its ability to become a post-colonial power which calls for those acting in its name to reflect upon the 'standards' that inspire their action.

### **The Decentring Agenda**

A second strand to our research programme has been to spell out in greater detail – from the standpoint of European Studies – the more general 'decentring agenda' called for by global IR.<sup>18</sup> Critically, such a decentring approach is both epistemological and prescriptive, targeting the motives and forms of the EU's external relations. It starts with operationalizing Chakrabarty's call for 'provincializing' Europe, e.g. questioning Eurocentric accounts of world history and politics;<sup>19</sup> moves on to 'engaging' other perspectives in which Europe may or may not figure;

and then aims at ‘reconstructing’ an EU approach to the rest of the world that recognises delegitimising patterns. To be sure, we sought to assuage concerns that such a decentring agenda may only end up empowering other power centres in the world and their own hegemonic, and at times violent, practices, by stressing our goal to eschew neocolonial habits which demand from others full convergence with European practices without giving up the EU’s cutting-edge project of empowerment via democratisation, rule of law, and support for the rights of the vulnerable. One central area of concern is Europe’s so-called neighbourhood where the transformative potential that comes with engagement with the EU has been considerably dampened by its propensity to reproduce old patterns of sphere of influence, and to support regime stability over democratisation.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, and although it does privilege an examination of inter-state relations, the decentring agenda is attuned to the risk of ‘methodological nationalism’ on two counts. First, it is fair to say that beyond decentring to other national viewpoints, we are ultimately committed to what we have labelled ‘double decentring’, namely a commitment to opening the black box of other states and engaging with the viewpoints of groups and individuals within, whether that of LGBT communities,<sup>21</sup> gendered perspectives through the lens of decolonial feminism,<sup>22</sup> or citizens’ agendas in conflict prevention.<sup>23</sup>

Second, ultimately, external decentring calls for internal decentring. Much of what we are after has to do with patterns of social relations within European countries themselves. In this sense, it is right to question the ways in which famous social theorists – Habermas and Beck, for instance, call for both the re-affirmation of cosmopolitanism as a central feature of the European project while eschewing what they refer to as multiculturalism – or beyond labels, the empowerment of internal ‘others’, whose scapegoating is one aspect of the populist threat to the very European integration they seek to save from itself.<sup>24</sup> As Gurminder Bhambra has argued, ignoring the colonial histories of Europe enables the dismissal of its multicultural present and thus unwittingly reproduces features of the populist political debates they otherwise seek to transcend. Against an EU story which renders invisible the long-standing histories that connect those migrants with Europe, decentring must start from within. The danger is a form of neocolonial cosmopolitanism that legitimises policies of domination both within and outside Europe.

### **A Critique of ‘EU-as-Model Talk’**

A third strand of our research critically appraised the idea, both descriptively and normatively, that the EU system can and should serve as a model for governance beyond its own borders for other national,

regional, or global spheres of governance. In doing so, we partake in a broader critical theory approach to the EU, targeting both dominant political and academic discourse.<sup>25</sup> We argue for a problematisation of the label 'model' without denying the value added by EU governance for the rest of the world. We start by developing an analytical heuristic that builds on three semantic meanings of the term 'model' and outline the challenges of interpretation and translation that are associated with each: a) a representation of something meant to support its reproduction (architecture, engineering); b) an object of aspiration, worthy of imitation (psychology and role models); c) that which serves as an inspiration and the object of re-interpretation (figurative art for instance). Here again we advocate for greater reflexivity on the part of Europeans, that is, to systematically question assumptions behind their model discourse and practice. And we argue that if the cosmopolitan promise is to be retrieved from the radical critique of Eurocentrism, Europeans need to infuse the EU's message and practice with an ethos of mutual recognition as a crucial feature of a post-colonial agenda for the EU's role in the world.

It is worth noting that the recent poly-crisis that has bedevilled the EU makes it harder than ever to ignore the intimate link between internal and external critique. Doesn't the 'migration crisis', exploited by right-wing populist parties in many EU countries to trigger anti-EU sentiments find its roots in part in the EU's Middle East policy and its trade policy with Africa?<sup>26</sup> If the EU's poly-crisis and Great Britain's bailing out altogether from the club have undoubtedly affected the EU's image beyond its borders, how should it change the way it 'exports' its standards? Is it possible to speak of the EU as a model without invoking its quality as an experiment, which fails as often as it succeeds? If the EU is to claim anew some leadership in reforming global governance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the WTO to the WHO or the Bretton Woods institutions, it must pursue this global debate on governance with humility and self-awareness.

## **Conclusion**

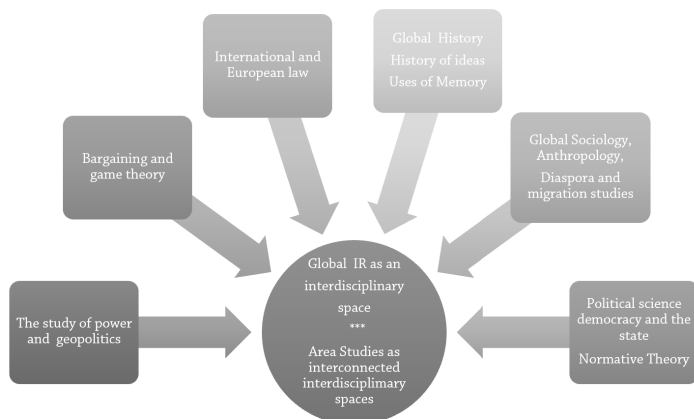
Many of us have chosen to 'do IR' for its emancipatory potential. But if history has taught us anything, it is that it would be foolish to believe that moral progress can happen simply as a result of polite conversations in our classroom without being backed up by living and breathing democratic contestation and social struggle.

I started this short overview of Area Studies, and the place of Europe within it, by reflecting on my time in Oxford. It might be apposite to conclude, therefore, by coming back to our own grounds. In 2015, and again in 2020, students at Oxford demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes which adorns Oriel College and overlooks passers-by on Oxford's High Street. In doing so, they followed in the footsteps

of University of Cape Town students who had successfully expelled the 19th century imperialist business magnate from their campus under the battle cry ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, thus sparking an international movement calling for the decolonisation of universities across the world. ‘Destruction’, the accusation which their critics enjoyed making, was not the point. Instead, this agenda is about the ‘re-construction’ of our shared social space, starting with the places, our University, where knowledge is created and appropriated according to entrenched patterns of power distribution which must be disrupted for progress to happen. Since then, and alongside more than a hundred Oxford colleagues, students and staff, I have been involved in multifaceted efforts for our University to acknowledge, further explore and remedy its own colonial legacies, to address the ways they reverberate today in its physical and mental environment, its curricula, hiring or admissions practices.<sup>27</sup> As this special issue goes to press in the summer of 2020, we are regaining momentum as part of the global protests led by *Black Lives Matter*. The hope is for radical pedagogical, disciplinary and institutional change, not only in Oxford, but around Europe, to encourage the next generation to learn more about the present of their colonial and imperial past.<sup>28</sup> For if a university like ours, at the very heart of the former coloniser’s space, fails to engage in decolonial work, what hope is there for our society at large?

## Annex

Figure 1: Global IR and Area Studies as Interdisciplinary Spaces



1 Laurence W. B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

2 See Andrew Hurrell in this volume. See also: Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2014): 647-659; Andrew Hurrell, "Can the Study of Global Governance be Decentred?" in *Global Governance from Regional Perspectives. A Critical View*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 25-44; Knud Erik Jørgensen and Tonny Brems Knudsen, eds., *International Relations in Europe: Traditions, Perspectives and Destinations*, vol 44 of *Routledge Advances in International Relations and Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006).

3 Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

4 Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014); Gurminder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

5 Maiken Gelardi, "Moving Global IR Forward — A Road Map," *International Studies Review* (2019): doi: 10.1093/isr/viz049.

6 Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

7 Tanja Börzel and Michael Zürn, "Contestation of the Liberal Script" (2020), *SCRIPTS Working Paper Series* no. 1, Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

8 There are too many relevant examples to list here. See for instance the work of my colleague Jörg Friedrichs from Oxford's International Development department, *Hindu-Muslim Relations: What Europe Might Learn from India*, (Abington, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018); or the debate around 'transformative constitutionalism' emanating from South Africa and then India, see K. E. Klare, "Legal Culture and Transformative Constitutionalism," *South African Journal on Human Rights* 14, no. 1 (1998): 146-188; M. Hailbronner, "Transformative Constitutionalism: Not Only in the Global South," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 65, no. 3 (2017): 527-565. Or in the field of security: Pinar Bilgin, "Inquiring into Others' Conceptions of the International and Security," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 3 (2017): 652-655; and on what we can learn from nuclear-free zones, see S. Mpfu-Walsh, "Obedient Rebellion, Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones and Global Nuclear Order, 1967-2017," (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 2020).

9 For the first and brilliant overview of the field see the forthcoming: Yann Stivachtis, Didier Bigo, Thomas Diez, Evangelos Fanoulis, and Ben Rosamond (eds) "The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies" (London; New York: 2020).

10 Kate Sullivan in this volume.

11 See footnote 8.

12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York:



13 Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds. *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Kalypso Nicolaïdis and Nora Fisher Onar, "Europe's Post-Imperial Condition," in *Revisiting the European Union as Empire*, eds. Hartmut Behr and Yannis A. Stivachtis (London; New York: Routledge, 2015): 115-133.

14 See inter alia: John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "Southern Barbarians? A Postcolonial Critique of EU-niversalism" in *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies*, Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 281-302; Félix Krawatzek, "Collective Memory," *Oxford Bibliographies* (2020); Toni Hastrup, "EU as Mentor? Promoting Regionalism as External Relations Practice in EU–Africa Relations," *Journal of European Integration* 35, no. 7 (2013): 785-800; Olivia Rutazibwa, "From Conditionality to Operation Artemis: Humanitarian Interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa and Local Agency," *Studia Diplomatica* 59, no. 2 (2006): 97-121; Thomas Diez, "Normative power as hegemony." *Cooperation and Conflict* 48.2 (2013): 194-210.

15 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

16 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, Ill; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Georgios Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J. S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

17 Kalypso Nicolaïdis et al, "From Metropolis to Microcosmos: Europe's New Standards of Civilisation," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 42, no. 3 (2014): 718-745; Ann Towns, "The Status of Women as a Standard of 'Civilization'," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): 681-706; Hartmut Behr, "The European Union in the Legacies of Imperial Rule? EU Accession Politics Viewed from a Historical Comparative Perspective," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 2 (2007): 239-262.

18 Nora Fisher Onar and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power," *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (2013): 283-303; Stephan Keukeleire and Sharon Lecocq, "Operationalising the Decentring Agenda: Analysing European Foreign Policy in a Non-European and Post-Western World," *Cooperation and Conflict* 53, no. 2 (2018): 277-295. On rising powers, see Nora Fisher Onar, "Historical Legacies in Rising Powers: Toward a (Eur) Asian Approach," *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2013): 411-430.

19 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

20 Dimitar Bechev and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "From Policy to Polity: Can the EU's Special Relations with its 'Neighbourhood' be Decentred?" *JCMS: Journal of*

*Common Market Studies* 48, no. 3 (2010): 475-500.

21 Rahul Rao, "Echoes of Imperialism in LGBT Activism," in *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity, and Colonial Legacies*, Kalypso Nicolaidis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 355-372.

22 María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," [Hypatia](#) 25, no. 4 (2010): 742-759.

23 Sam Sussman and Kalypso Nicolaidis, "R2P: 'State of Play'," *International Spectator*, 51, no. 2 (2016): 9-18.

24 Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Whither Europe? Postcolonial versus Neocolonial Cosmopolitanism." *Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 187-202; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

25 Tobias Lenz and Kalypso Nicolaidis, "EU-topia? A Critique of the European Union as a Model," *Culture* 4, no. 2 (2019): 78-101. See also: Knud Erik Jørgensen, and Morten Valbjørn, "Four Dialogues and the Funeral of a Beautiful Relationship: European Studies and New Regionalism," *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 1 (2012): 3-27.

26 Sonja Buckel, Fabian Georgi, John Kannankulam, and Jens Wissel. "The European Border Regime in Crisis: Theory, Methods and Analyses in Critical European Studies." *Studien* 8 (2017).; Emily Jones and Clara Weinhardt, "Echoes Of Colonialism' in the Negotiation of Economic Partnership Agreements, 2001-8" in Kalypso Nicolaidis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, eds. *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 201-218.

27 Many contemporary Oxford scholars have written critically about the unfinished business of decolonisation, from Danny Dorling's *Rule Britannia* to Robert Gildea's *Empires of the mind*, Elleke Boehmer's *Post-colonial Poetics*, Miles Larmer's *Kataganese Gendarmes*, Sally Tomlinson's *Education and Race from Empire to Brexit* or my own *Echoes of Empire*.

28 Brian Kwoba, Roseanne Chantiluke, and Athinangamso Nkopo, eds., *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2018); Britta Timm Knudsen and Casper Andersen, "Affective Politics and Colonial Heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford," [International Journal of Heritage Studies](#) 25, no. 3 (2019): 239-258.